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U.S. Protected Nazi Hunted By the French

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U.S. intelligence services protected Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie for at least five years after the end of World War II in Germany before he slipped out of Europe to South America in 1951, according to documents obtained by a French lawyer and the personal accounts of former U.S. counterintelligence officers.

According to correspondence between the French Ministry of Justice and French army officers in Germany, U.S. authorities blocked at least three French requests for the return of the former Gestapo chief for the Lyon region to face charges that he had sent thousands of Jews and French resistance fighters to their death.

The documents, reviewed by Washington Post correspondent Michael Dobbs in Paris, show that in 1950 a French court received information obtained from American counterintelligence officials in Germany about Barbie's relationship with a colonel in the French resistance on trial for collaboration.

The French documents also show that in February, 1950, the French military police in West Germany relayed an American offer to make Barbie available in the trial of the French resistance colonel, Rene Hardy, only if Barbie would be returned to U.S. officials. The French refused that offer, saying it was "impossible to meet."

Barbie, known as the "Butcher of Lyon," was extradited from Bolivia last week and returned to France to stand trial for "crimes against humanity."

The documents reflecting a U.S. intelligence relationship with Barbie have been collected from French and German archives by Serge Klarsfeld, a French lawyer. He and his wife, Beate, tracked down Barbie in 1972 in South America, where he was living under the name Klaus Altmann, and exposed his true identity.

Meanwhile, a former U.S. Army counterintelligence officer in postwar Germany, Erhard Dabringhaus, said in an interview that he deliberately lied to French secret service officials when they twice interviewed him in 1948 while searching for Barbie.

Dabringhaus, 65, a professor of German history at Wayne State University in Detroit, said that on two occasions in mid to late 1948, officers from France's secret counterintelligence agency, the Deuxieme Bureau, interviewed him in Augsburg and Munich seeking information on the whereabouts of Barbie.

Both times, Dabringhaus said, he "played dumb" under orders from superiors, even though he knew Barbie was hiding in a U.S. Army-requisitioned house.

"I felt very nauseated," said Dabringhaus. "They had found several mass graves that they thought Barbie was responsible for. Since he was a killer of Frenchmen, I saw the urgency these people had in trying to get him. But orders are orders.... They had to go home empty-handed."

Dabringhaus' account seems to mesh with Klarsfeld's documentation indicating that French intelligence agents held meetings with U.S. officials on Barbie's whereabouts on May 14 and 18, 1948, and again on July 16, 1948, in Augsburg.

A letter obtained by Klarsfeld, written on July 28, 1949, by the French commander in Germany to the Justice Ministry in Paris, expresses French frustration with the lack of American cooperation. It concluded that Barbie "enjoys the protection of the American occupation authorities."

The emerging account of the U.S. intelligence relationship with Barbie appears to answer several lingering questions about U.S. involvement in the flight of one of France's most notorious Nazi war criminals.

It is certain to fuel already strong emotions in France, where the return of Barbie has resurrected old suspicions that postwar U.S. intelligence services protected some accused Nazi war criminals because they were providing intelligence about Soviet activities and objectives in partitioned Germany and eastern Europe.

"We cut the French out of everything," said retired Army Col. Earl Lerette, an intelligence officer who operated a variety of spy operations out of Berlin after the war. "My unit had absolutely nothing to do with the French because we found that anything we gave to the French would get to the Russians before it got to the Deuxieme Bureau."

Interviews with Dabringhaus and other U.S. officials of the era depict various intelligence units in the military, CIA and State Department competing fiercely for "assets," or spies, to report on the threat of the Soviet standing army in Europe and the formation of the communist alliance.

The Barbie case also is bringing back painful memories of the schism in postwar France between those who collaborated with the German occupation authorities and those who aided the resistance forces of Charles de Gaulle.

Another former Army counterintelligence official surfaced yesterday in Pittsburg, Calif., claiming that he protected Barbie from French interrogators in the spring of 1946.

John Willms, who recently retired from a career in U.S. intelligence, told the Associated Press that he escorted Barbie to three days of interrogations in which the French "were ready to tear him [Barbie] apart." But, he said, they were not allowed to take custody of Barbie, who was under U.S. Army protection.

Dabringhaus ended World War II as a major in Army intelligence, but returned to the Army in 1948 as a civilian intelligence officer based initially in Augsburg with the Army's 970th Counterintelligence Corps.

Dabringhaus said he obtained false identity papers for Barbie during 1948 at a time when Barbie was plotting his escape from Europe to South America. While Barbie lined up his escape route, he was drawing \$1,700 a month from Army intelligence for running a network of spies under Dabringhaus.

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